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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5014  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 2769  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2634  
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY  
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000405

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, INL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCRM](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BIG BROTHER ON THE STREETS

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: The presence of undercover security agents on the streets is nothing new in Turkmenistan. People have grown accustomed to seeing them standing on nearly every street corner of the capital, purportedly to ensure "public order." Recently, Turkmen authorities installed security cameras on many streets in Ashgabat, eliciting reactions ranging from confusion to dismay to skepticism. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) Since January, rows of metal frames equipped with Russian VOCORD traffic monitoring systems, have been installed over major thoroughfares throughout Ashgabat. The devices consist of a high-resolution digital camera, speed-detecting radar, a PAL-video camera, infrared pulse floodlights, and a specialized server and software for data collection and analysis. The system allows for round-the-clock automated street monitoring, and is able to recognize and photograph license plates, traffic violations, accidents and traffic jams, as well as collect traffic flow statistics. Once collected, the data is broadcast to the observation center of the Interior Ministry's Traffic Police Department.

14. (SBU) The system is reportedly undergoing testing now, and is expected to become fully operational next September. An Embassy driver heard recently from a police officer friend, however, that contractors have encountered problems switching on the system, even though all of the cameras and radar have been installed and connected to the main server. There are also rumors that people have already begun receiving notifications mailed to their home address containing a photograph of their vehicle, license plate number, a description of their alleged traffic violation and the fine imposed. Still others, including some Embassy local staff, report that they although they have violated traffic rules on the video monitored streets, they have received no notifications.

15. (SBU) The presence of street cameras have raised a lot of questions among Ashgabat's residents. One taxi driver, whose views mirror that of many others, commented, "It is very hard to drive in Ashgabat without breaking the rules. If they (traffic police) start taking pictures of every traffic violation, they will have nothing

to do all day but label envelopes." He predicted that the new system will be a "huge mess," and went on to note that he, like most taxi drivers, rents his car from someone else, in which case the traffic violation and fine would end up going to the wrong person. "Besides," he said, "drivers from provinces like Ahal and Mary don't even have proper mailing addresses. How will they notify them by mail?"

16. (SBU) The Traffic Police have yet to explain publicly how the new system will work. People are afraid that they will (as usual) put it off until after it is in operation and people have started receiving fines. The same taxi driver opined, somewhat cynically, "Of course they (the government) never notify anyone in advance. It's not in their interest to do so. If they did so, people would be more cautious and the police would collect fewer fines, which would mean less money into their pockets." According to another source, the system may be launched as early as April 1st, but there has been no official announcement to this effect in the state-run media.

17. (SBU) While most of the drivers are not happy with what is being referred to as "Dom Dva" (the Russian name for the television series "Big Brother") on the streets, pedestrians, by contrast, are very positive. They say that with so many unruly drivers in Ashgabat, having cameras on the streets will lower the number of accidents and deaths. Another noted skeptically, "This is not Europe. This system will never work here: It might for a month or two, and then their server will break down or something else will stop working. Nothing runs properly here."

18. (SBU) The value of the installation contract is not known, nor  
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the exact identity of the contractor. Representatives of "BIOST," the only company that is registered locally and licensed to install security systems, confirmed that they did not install this one, nor do they know who did. Many believe a Russian firm was engaged for the job.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: The presence of cameras on the streets is problematic for Ashgabat's residents, who are uncertain whether they will be used for "observation and analysis" or for imposing fines on violators. The latter would likely cause discontent among many, but could also have the effect of imposing some order in a city where, when it comes to driving, most anything goes - unless, of course, someone is watching. END COMMENT.

MILES